



# HAROLD PINTER'S THE BIRTHDAY PARTY AS A SIGNIFICANT PLAY OF THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

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## ABSTRACT

A lot of writers all over the world have attempted to write in this genre, but the main pioneers are Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. This paper examines the famous play *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter as a Theatre of the Absurd play. The present paper attempts to highlight the absurd characteristics present in Pinter's play which begins in a comic way but has physical and potential violence involved in it. It's all about a sheltered young man who fears visitors.

**KEYWORDS:** The Theatre of the Absurd, Existentialism, imagery, dialogues, senselessness.

Martin Esslin remarks that,

"If a good play must have a clearly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without cognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and property the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches; they are the reflection of dreams and nightmares, if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue these often consist of incoherent babblings" (Esslin 22).

The Theatre of the Absurd is a theatrical style that originated in France in the late 1940's. The term "Theatre of the Absurd" was coined by the critic Martin Esslin who published the book by the same name in 1961. "Absurd" basically means "out of harmony" in a musical framework. In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined his views on the term "Absurd". "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose..... cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (Web).

The term "Absurd" is even applied to a wide range of plays where some characteristics coincide with other plays like broad comedy which is often similar to vaudeville, mixed with shocking or tragic images; characters caught in despairing situations forced to do repetitive actions; dialogues full of clichés, wordplay and nonsense etc. The Theatre of the Absurd is commonly associated with "Existentialism", as it was an influencing philosophy during the rise of the Theatre of the Absurd (1940-1960). Many of the Absurdist dramatists were contemporaries of Jean-Paul-Sartre, the philosophical spokesman of Existentialism in Paris. It primarily expresses the belief that in a Godless universe, human existence has no sense or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down. Although the Theatre of the Absurd relies profoundly on existentialism, according to Martin Esslin it differs in a certain way. Here the dramatists project the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by abandoning rational devices and discursive thought. The Theatre of the Absurd plays are not regular plays. These plays are a reaction against the traditional theatre. There is no story or plot. There are no recognizable characters. There is no structure and there is no beginning, middle and an end. These plays are inspired from dreams and nightmares. There is no philosophy in the theatre of the absurd. We need to judge it on its own basis only. In the Theatre of the Absurd objects are more important than language. What happens outdoes what is being said about it. It is the hidden implied meaning of the words that assume primary importance in absurd theatre. The theatre of the absurd tried to communicate an undissolved totality of perception- hence it had to go beyond language.

The main exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd are Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Friedrich Durrenmatt, Fernando Arrabal and Edward Albee. Harold Pinter being the most influential modern British dramatist is remembered for the plays like *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Homecoming* (1964), *Betrayal* (1978), *The Servant* (1963), *The Go-Between* (1970), *The French Lieutenant's Women* (1981), *The Trail* (1993), *Sleuth* (2007) etc. He was influenced by Samuel Beckett. He says that, "I am a very traditional playwright" (Dukore 135) and later adds that "I am a writer, not a critic". Though Pinter never provides a thematic summary in the concluding acts of the play as his plays end in a puzzled manner. His character's just talk. The unreliability of memory is a major theme of Pinter's later plays. He articulates that his characters are clearest in their silences. For his unique style of writing he even received the Noble Prize in Literature on 2005.

"The Birthday Party" is the best-known play of Harold Pinter, but was initially both a commercial and critical disaster. The title of the play "The Birthday Party" contains a birthday party for Stanley who insists it is not his birthday. Birthday not only means the anniversary of one's birth, it also means the day of one's birth, and in "The Birthday Party" the celebration of the former helps to create the latter. The intruder turns Stanley into what McCann calls a new man. At their hands he is reborn, made into a different kind of a person on a birthday that becomes a birth-day. The title of the play "The Birthday Party" is metaphorical and has an implied meaning as the sheltered young man fears visitors.

The play "The Birthday Party" focuses chiefly on the victim, Stanley Webber who is a lodger in the house of Meg and Petey Boles, in a seaside town who seems not to have left it since he arrived the year before. The two sinister strangers Goldberg and McCann arrive, brutally interrogate him, break his eyeglasses, crush his spirit, drive him to a breakdown because of which he cannot speak comprehensibly and take him away with them. Goldberg has an affair with Lulu, a neighbor, but he and McCann turn her away when her presence interrupts their activities with Stanley. Pinter does not reveal why Stanley is in the lodging house or why the intruders do what they do.

Meg is a motherly old woman and Petey is his husband. He is a kindly old man, employed as a deck-chair attendant on the promenade. The central character-Stanley is a man in his late thirties, indolent and apathetic who has somehow found refuge in Meg's boarding house, which has not had any other visitor for years. Meg treats him with motherliness so stifling as to be almost incestuous. The nature of language and dialogue is of the main theme of menace in *The Birthday Party*. The dialogue in the opening scene between Petey and Meg is filled with absurd questions asked by Meg followed by Petey's monosyllabic answers:

MEG You got your paper?

PETEY Yes

MEG Is it good?

PETEY Not bad.

MEG What does it say?

PETEY Nothing much.

This changes drastically with the arrival of Goldberg and McCann. Both of them alternatively ask illogical questions to torture Stanley.

MCCANN What about the Albigensian heresy?

GOLDBERG Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?

MCCANN What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?

Two sinister visitors, Goldberg and McCann want a room in Meg's boarding house. It soon becomes clear that they are after Stanley. Goldberg who seems to have a large number of different names is seducing the dumb blonde woman from next door. In the third act, Goldberg and McCann take Stanley away in a big black car. He is now dressed in black jacket and striped trousers, has a clean collar, wears a bowler hat, carries his broken glasses in his hands, and has become speechless and blank, like a puppet. When Meg comes down, she is still dreaming of the wonderful party and does not realize what has happened. Pinter uses imagery and allegory to express a deeper meaning which is not fully explained. In fact he allows the plays to speak for itself.

According to Harold Pinter,

“I think it is impossible- and certainly for me- to start writing a play from any kind of abstract idea. .... I start writing a play from an image of a situation and a couple of characters involved, and these people always remain for me quite real; if they were not, the play could not be written” (Dukore 10).

In the Theatre of the Absurd there is a deliberate evasion of communication. Communication itself between two people is so frightening that rather than to do that there is continual cross-talk, a continual talking about other things, rather than what is at the root of their relationship.

The great writer and a critic, Martin Esslin places Harold Pinter as one of the major dramatists of theatre of the Absurd. He says he was equally efficient as an actor, director and playwright. Esslin in his book “The Theatre of the Absurd” says,

“Of all the major dramatists of the Absurd, Harold Pinter represents the most original combination of avant -grade and traditional elements. The world of his imagination is that of a poet under the shadow of Kafka, Joyce and Beckett. .... the fruits of Pinter's apprenticeship as an actor in the world of the English provincial repertory theatre; he is a through -going professional man of the theatre, equally proficient as an actor, director or playwright” (Esslin 263-264).

Martin Esslin describes Theatre of the Absurd as a phenomenon. It was against the traditional theatre yet it gained immediate success and appreciation. Two of the major dramatists of Theatre of the Absurd also won the Nobel Prize – Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. It became famous not only in France, from where it originated but all over the world. Martin Esslin in his book “The Theatre of the Absurd” says,

“The success of the Theatre of the Absurd, achieved within a short span of time, remains one of the most astonishing aspects of this astonishing phenomenon. That plays so strange and puzzling, so clearly devoid of the traditional attractions of the well-made drama, should within less than a decade have reached the stage of the world from Finland to Japan, from Norway to the Argentina, and that they should have stimulated a large body of work in a similar convention, are in themselves powerful and entirely empirical tests of the importance of the Theatre of the Absurd” (Esslin 27-28).

#### CONCLUSION:

Although the Theatre of the Absurd was a revolt against the traditional theatre it became successful as it captured all the facets of the human spirit. Unreliability of memory and various types of silences are observed in the play. Even though Pinter's play is quite absurd as it lacked in proper structure and well framed characters, it became a theatrical success.

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